F/ coral Gables

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Remnants of Coliseum sought

By CHRISTINA A. SAMUELS
Herald Staff Writer

Historic preservationists hastily are scavenging pieces of the Coral Gables Coliseum before its impending demolition.

Ellen Uguccioni, the city's historic preservation director, plans to keep the neon letters that spelled out "The Coliseum." Perhaps four of the decorative column caps can be kept, if the wrecking crews are careful.

But the boxy pink building at 1500 Douglas Rd. is coming down, perhaps in the next few weeks, to make way for a 58,320 square-foot Service Merchandise.

The pieces saved from the building might wind up part of a fountain, or another structure in the city.

"Certainly, it's just a gesture," Uguccioni said. "It's a gesture meant to remind people. It's a memorial."

The Coliseum, which could hold 7,500 persons, was designed by New York architect Anthony Ten Eyck Brown, who also designed the Dade County Courthouse. Originally planned to have lush external ornamentation, the Coliseum's design became simpler as the building boom faded away in the late 1920s.

More than 11,000 people attended its opening, Nov. 10, 1927, and Will Rogers was the host.

Over time, it was used as a theater and opera house, a site for boxing and wrestling matches, an ice-skating rink, a roller derby and a bowling alley. In 1978 it was converted to a health club, which went bankrupt in 1987. It has been empty since then.

Its demolition has been done in degrees.

Vandals, squatters, rodents and termites have almost destroyed the building's cavernous interior. Squatters set fire to the building while trying to keep warm Dec. 6, 1992. The Coral Gables Commission agreed last May that the building could be razed if the owners or a developer could demonstrate solid plans for new construction.

The Service Merchandise that plans to build on the site will incorporate Mediterranean-style elements. The store will have a columned facade, an arched entrance surrounded by red neon lights and terra-cotta roof tiles. Colors will be a combination of pink, beige and gray. The site is to have 216 parking spaces, 90 more than required by Gables regulations.

Jeffrey Weiss, one of the Coliseum's owners, met Thursday with Uguccioni to discuss the salvage. He said he doesn't want to be perceived as "a bad guy" since he and his partners tried for a long time to find someone to buy and restore the building.